FROM SPY TO OKAY GUY: TRUST AND VALIDITY IN FIELDWORK WITH THE POLICE

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Of the several sergeants in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) whom I accompanied during eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in 1993 and 1994, one was an aspiring crime novelist. Not surprisingly, he set his stories in a police patrol division. After I accompanied him a few times, he introduced a character based on me into the novel he was writing. He told me that my character performed a useful narrative function: Conversations between the officers and the ethnographer allowed him to introduce the essentials of police work into the story. Of great interest to me was the relationship between the fictional observer and the observed. Initially, the officers were suspicious. Because the ethnographer had received permission from the police chief to do the research, "Everyone thinks he's a spy," the author-sergeant told me. However, over time the ethnographer gained the trust of the officers. By the middle of the story, according to the sergeant, "Everyone thinks he's an okay guy."

I came to believe that my fictional transformation from "spy" to "okay guy" mirrored reality. Initially wary and skeptical of my presence, most officers grew friendly and helpful with time. This transformation raises a number of interesting and important questions: Why were the officers initially wary? Did they behave differently in my presence; and if so, how? Why did the transformation occur? What do these dynamics, concerning as they do the shifting ground on which ethnographic relationships are established, say about the type of data I gathered and how I gathered them? These questions are important, in large measure because they point to one of the critical issues in ethnography—the acquisition of valid data. How *can* an ethnographer ever be sure that behavior witnessed is, in fact, natural in that setting? How to account for the effect of the ethnographer's presence on the behavior of those under study? And if their behavior is affected, should the ethnographer's data and conclusions be considered suspect?

It is validity that I explore here, in the context of my fieldwork experience. To do so, it is useful first to take a step back and assess where things stood when I entered the field. In the summer of 1993 the LAPD was a much-maligned and rigorously scrutinized organization. The beating of motorist Rodney King in 1991 had magnified long-standing concerns about police brutality, particularly in minority communities. Such concerns were legitimated by the so-called Christopher Commission, which exhaustively reviewed uses of force by the LAPD (Independent Commission 1991). The commission, named for its chairman, Warren Christopher, discovered that violent officers were insufficiently sanctioned, in keeping with an organizational culture

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that emphasized aggressive crime fighting. Public debate about the LAPD was further fueled by two well-publicized trials of the officers involved in the King incident and by the massive civil unrest that followed the officers' acquittals in the first trial.

The mid-1990s were, in other words, a propitious time for me to begin doing fieldwork with the LAPD. Because the LAPD was the subject of such scrutiny, I thought that my work would attract interest. But I was simultaneously afraid that officers would be reluctant to trust me and would modify their behavior in my presence. If they did, I was uncertain whether my data would be valid.

Let me explain why my concern about validity eased over time, focusing on two primary points. The first has to do with how officers reacted to me. Reactions were, in fact, often fairly strong and expressed a range of puzzlement and worry. LAPD officers were unused to having people, especially academics, do ride-alongs. While I was with them in the field, officers were forced to decide how to respond to my presence—where to take me, what to tell me, and how to position me (literally and figuratively). But I came to see how they reacted to me not as obstacles to data but as data themselves. These reactions told me much about how the police understood themselves and their relationships with the public. Officers' reactions to me, in other words, helped not to weaken but to fortify the validity of my analysis.

That said, I do believe that the ethnographer's behavior affects the quality of data collected. This relates to my second point, on interaction with subjects in the field. I had to understand the department's political situation and to approach officers with that in mind. That meant that I needed to be patient and to avoid direct questions about potentially delicate subjects, such as the King beating. It was also important for me to suspend my own (potentially critical) judgments of the police, to attempt earnestly to see the world through the officers' eyes. I did not share many officers' extreme distrust of public oversight, but I sought to bracket my opinions so that I could understand their perspective. This, of course, required an empathy central to ethnography; that empathy is something a researcher must possess and convey to acquire valid data.

My points extend to other fieldwork situations. Ethnographers always do well to analyze thoughtfully their subjects' reactions to their presence and to act with patience and empathy in the field. These strategies lead to greater confidence in the validity of ethnographic data.

Reacting to the Ride–Along

My fieldwork with the LAPD consisted mostly of ride-alongs, plus several interviews. I was interested in how officers defined and controlled the territories they patrolled (for the full analysis, see Herbert 1997). The ride-alongs proved more instructive than the interviews, for several reasons. First, the ride-alongs provided an opportunity to witness the actual workings of police geopolitics. Given that many officers were well practiced in hyperbole, it was important to assess their deeds against their words. Second, the ride-alongs provided a focus for our interactions. I learned most about police practice and self-justification through conversations about specific events I

witnessed. Finally, the ride-alongs provided time for me to develop rapport with the officers, a process assisted by my doing multiple ride-alongs with most of them.

Rapport rarely came easily. Most officers appeared reluctant to have me tag along. Some expressed this reluctance passively. I often endured long waits—up to two and a half hours—between the time I arrived at the patrol station and the time an officer took me out. Others expressed their reluctance by asking numerous questions about who I was, what I wanted to learn, and how I intended to publish my analysis. But others were more direct. One sergeant said to me, loudly, as I waited for him: "If you think I'm delaying taking you out, that's a good observation." The other officers within earshot all laughed. Another time, two officers conspired to take from me the notebook I used to record impressions: One came behind me and pinned my arms while the other pulled the notebook from my hands.

These expressions of ambivalence about my presence, as I suggested earlier, are best seen not as obstacles to data but as data themselves. They told me much about how the political fallout that accompanied the King beating affected the department's perception of itself and the public. Clearly, many officers were afraid of what I might do to them or to the department should I publish something unflattering in a widely read publication. One officer, after answering a number of questions regarding her work as a decoy prostitute, stopped and asked: "Who am I talking to?" She confessed at that point that she was afraid I was a journalist. It did not help matters for me that many officers knew that permission for my ride-alongs had come from the police chief. And not just any ordinary police chief, but one, Willie Williams, who had been brought in from outside the department as an agent of reform and who was therefore eyed warily by the officers. Many in the LAPD clearly felt the effects of public disaffection and expressed that in their approach to me.

Yet almost all the officers I encountered ultimately talked to me very openly. Many provided a vigorous defense of the officers who had beaten King. Others discussed the cultural geography of the patrol division (one of the most demographically diverse in the city) in terms that bordered on racist. Still others were openly contemptuous of the command staff, up to and including the chief. In general, a significant majority of the officers I accompanied answered my questions expansively, described their opinions honestly, and sought to help me as much as they could. Indeed, one of the most voluble and helpful was the very sergeant who loudly proclaimed his antipathy to my presence!

How, then, to understand this disjuncture between how officers initially reacted and how they subsequently behaved? Part of the answer involves how I interacted with them. But much of it lies within the social structuring of the police. Explaining this disjuncture, in other words, was one of the intellectual puzzles whose resolution spurred insight into the police.

Reading the Reactions

To best think of the officers' reactions to me as data, I needed to analyze those reactions in light of other impressions I gathered. One of the most palpable compo-

nents of police culture, one I noticed almost immediately, was the strong sense of fraternity that characterized the subculture. This strong self-definition has been noted by several police researchers. Arthur Niederhoffer, for example, chronicled the strong "us versus them" conflict that officers construct between themselves and the public (1967). Peter Manning analyzed the elaborate pomp that accompanies such police rituals as funerals (1977). As a result, any outsider, especially one equipped with a pen and a notebook, is likely to be scrutinized. But to share time with officers is to share those daily experiences that explain the intensity of the police identity. Two major components of police culture are particularly pertinent here—an unrelenting emphasis on officer safety and a pronounced sense of morality.

The subcultural emphasis on safety is easy to understand, and its regular manifestations are impossible to ignore. Officers continually approach situations with the safety of themselves and others preeminently in mind. This, obviously, includes any ethnographer who happens to be with them. On several occasions I was instructed to act to ensure my safety—to stay in the car, to move from one side of the street to the other, to stay sequestered in a doorway, to keep an eye on a particular suspect, to be ready to duck if necessary. In each case, I later discussed these instructions to learn how safety structured the officers' thoughts and actions. By sharing time with officers, I shared the possibility of danger that is central to their work experience and thus came gradually to be more readily welcomed into their community. Indeed, my actions in one particular situation—I volunteered to walk back alone to lock a sergeant's car on a street the officers considered very dangerous—were the subject of several subsequent conversations with officers throughout the division. The officers seemed to understand it as a rite of passage that I had successfully negotiated. Less talked about, but in retrospect perhaps more significant, was the fact that my geographical familiarity with the division often exceeded that of the sergeants with whom I rode. On several occasions I provided correct directions to a destination,[1] more than once when the call involved possible danger. Key to officers' ability to remain safe is to arrive at scenes promptly and properly, and my assistance enabled them to accomplish this. I could be useful to them, instead of being "just" a rider.

My sustained presence thus enabled officers to share their daily preoccupation with safety. They could also express the potent sense of morality with which they cloak their work. Expressions of this morality are numerous and serve to construct police work as a near mythic struggle between the forces of good and those of evil (Herbert 1996). Central is the "ultimate sacrifice" that officers stand poised to make—to surrender their lives to ensure the well-being of others. Officers invariably expressed this willingness when I rode with them to a potentially dangerous situation; they explained the need for me to consider only my own safety if something, in one sergeant's words, were to go "sideways." I was to ignore the plight of the officer and do anything necessary to leave the situation as quickly as possible. In this way I was brought into the world, and worldview, of the officers in question, as yet another citizen whose protection they considered paramount.

Thus the understandable skepticism that characterized my initial encounters with officers typically withered with continued exposure to the daily realities of urban policing and to the social world the police construct in order to apprehend and manage those realities. Both the skepticism and its decay were useful data, the analysis of which deepened my understandings of how officers see their occupational culture. In particular, I came to grasp how safety and morality matter to the police and how the expression of these concerns made it possible for my presence to be more readily accepted; I shared their sense of danger, I emerged as a possible object for their morally virtuous project as protector. In short, my presence articulated with central facets of police culture in ways that helped me in *my* project as cultural analyst. I did not obstruct data; I helped to create it.

Reacting to the Reactions

One response to concern about validity in ethnography is therefore to treat reactions to the field-worker as data every bit as important as other data. That said, it is both glib and inaccurate to suggest that the ethnographer's behavior does not shape the nature of the interactions he or she experiences in the field. A field-worker adopts strategies to ensure the greatest possibility for development of trusting relationships. As it turns out, these are nothing special: They are the same strategies we adopt in any situation in which we hope to build trust. In short, one must be solicitous, patient, honest, and empathetic. Without constantly demonstrating these qualities, the ethnographer is unlikely to get past superficialities with informants.

For me, being solicitous came very easily. I was genuinely interested in police work and found it easy to convey that interest. Flattered by such attention, most of the officers responded volubly. With those who were more reluctant, it helped to be patient. For some officers, it took a second or even third ride-along before they became sufficiently comfortable to talk more expansively. The best strategy, I found, was to wait, and to focus conversation on the incidents that came up; with time, most officers would extend such conversations into other, related matters. But even when I encountered a reluctant informant, I considered it imperative never to misrepresent who I was or what I intended to do with my data, a point emphasized by Richard Leo (1995). This was a principled defense of honesty and also an ethnographic strategy—if my informants developed any sense that I lacked integrity, they would likely become more reticent. I knew that to be dishonest would be both exploitative and unproductive.

My desire to be honest, however, did sometimes conflict with another goal of mine—to display empathy. This empathy came relatively easily. I was interested in understanding the officers' worldviews, and to the extent that I conveyed that interest, I increased their trust in me. However, some officers said things that I knew to be untrue or that I found disagreeable. One officer, for example, elaborated a defense of the officers who beat Rodney King that was rife with inaccuracies about the actual threat King posed that night. I had studied the King case extensively enough to know the factual record quite well, and I believed firmly that the beating was

unjustified. To be honest in this situation, I could not convey an endorsement of the officer's story. But I knew that to disagree openly might threaten his sense that I could be empathetic. As it turned out, I decided that I knew this particular officer well enough to gently challenge his rendition of the facts, a gesture that did not seem to disturb him. And, in fact, I came to believe that my response was the right one; it had the added benefit of signaling to him that I was attuned to hyperbole and would not suffer it easily. I pursued the same strategy in other instances, conveying with either my silence or a gentle rebuttal my lack of willingness to accept uncritically anything the officers said.

Empathy is a double-edged sword in ethnography, necessary to ensure trust but ever capable of prompting the field-worker to "go native" and lose critical consciousness. But critical reflexivity is every bit as much a part of the ethnographic enterprise as empathic understanding. It is imperative that the ethnographer cultivate a sense of analytical distance from the field setting. I found it useful, for example, to occasionally take several days off from fieldwork. I sometimes used the break to clear my mind of the field setting. On other occasions I read over my field notes and reflected on them. Either strategy worked to recapture my critical capacities and to refocus my attention when I reentered the field.

In short, the ethnographer's behavior does affect the amount and quality of the data he or she collects. Informants are people like any other, and strategies for building trust are the same in the field as everywhere. But, at the same time, the ethnographer's stance is imminently a critical one. A desirable push toward empathy has to be balanced against the need for more objective assessment. With attentiveness and self-reflexivity, the ethnographer can conduct external and internal conversations in ways that ensure that valid data are collected and critical assessments are made possible.

Conclusion

Mitchell Duneier, a former student of Howard Becker, claims in his recent urban ethnography, *Sidewalk,* that Becker had a ready answer for those who suggest that the presence of an ethnographer so distorts the reality being studied that the data collected are invalid (1999). According to Duneier, the "Becker Principle" holds that the social realities of a given setting are sufficiently strong to assert themselves even in the presence of outsiders. Informants may initially act in unnatural ways owing to the observer's presence, but they will, in whole or part and sooner or later, fall sway to the behavioral and cognitive patterns of their social world. It is then the ethnographer's challenge to discover, describe, and interpret these patterns.

My analysis here is congruent with Becker's principle but adds a few corollaries. The first is that the manner in which informants respond to an observer is best understood as part of the data to be analyzed. In my case, it was useful to consider both the initial responses to my presence and how those responses changed over time. My second corollary is a reminder that the ethnographer *does* influence some parts of the reality of the setting, most notably interactions with informants. There-

fore, the field-worker must consciously adopt strategies that help ensure trust, although never at the cost of personal integrity or critical consciousness. Informants, like anyone else, respond to genuine interest from a listener who asks them to describe and explain their world.

Concern about the validity of ethnographic data is as understandable as it is widely shared. But, like other criticisms of ethnography, this need not stop field-workers in their tracks (Herbert 2000). My suggestion here is that seeming obstacles to data need not be understood as such and that sensible strategies can ensure high-quality interactions in the field. The analytical and personal challenges are certainly significant, but so are the analytical and personal rewards. It is never easy to understand and assess an alternative worldview, but that challenge lies at the heart of the enterprise of human geography; it enlarges the discipline as it enlarges ourselves. It is a valid enterprise, in more ways than one.

Note

1. Most of the sergeants knew that I lived in the patrol division and that I had done other ride-alongs. As a result, they often asked me for directions. Although I was reluctant to influence the officers' behavior in any overt way, these were requests with which I thought it best to comply, especially in emergency situations.

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